Jemubhai Patel (K Desai's novel The Inheritance of Loss) Guilt-ridden

Character   Jemubhai Patel (Jemu) is a retired judge living a secluded life in the picturesque mountain town of Kalimpong. He hides away there with his dog, Mutt, pondering his past and staring at his chessboard. Ironically, for a judge, he is ridden with guilt. He is trying to make sense of a terrible act he committed decades ago when he arranged for the killing of his young wife. He is also looking to atone for his cruel treatment of his father, and the chance comes when his granddaughter (now orphaned) comes to stay. Jemu has a lot to process. He studied at Cambridge and came back to India as a 'brown Englishman' who hated everything Indian, including his wife. He is a man of tremendous inner conflict. Not only has he cut himself off from his horrible past, but he feels like a foreigner in his own country. Through flashbacks, though, we gain insight into this troubled man. The racism he faced as an Indian student in England turned him against himself and forced him to adopt the manners of the host culture. He prides himself on being a man of 'civilised behaviour', but his violent anger can get the better of him.

Activities   Jemubhai keeps to himself, in a ramshackle and gated villa on the outskirts of town. He is disagreeable to his servants, loves his pet dog, Mutt, and plays chess with imaginary opponents. Sometimes he takes out English books from his mouldy bookshelves and looks at them, before falling asleep.

Illustrative moments

Brave   Somehow, although the judge is guilty of terrible crimes, especially of murdering his wife, he is not altogether unlikeable. In his younger years, we are told of how he managed to stomach the prejudice he faced in Cambridge as an Indian student in the 1930s. When he first arrives, he is shocked by the 'greyness'. 'He hadn't realised that here, too, people could be poor and live unaesthetic lives.' He knocks on doors advertising for tenants, but each time he is turned away, until Mrs Rice agrees to let to him—she was desperate for money. The judge finds a tray of bread, butter and milk outside his door every evening. One night, though, 'he worked up the courage to ask for a proper evening meal. "We don't eat much of a supper ourselves, James [she calls him 'James')]," said Mrs Rice. But the next day he found on his plate steaming baked beans on toast….Later, he marvelled at this act of courage, since he was soon to lose it all.'

Self-loathing   When Jemubhai gets married to a village girl, wholly unsuited to him, he learns to hate her. She represents everything he dislikes about India: villages, illiteracy and bodies. He has a loathing for bodies, sex and anything physical. Now he is forced, or at least he is expected, to make love to his wife, a person he doesn't even know. He performs the act and is disgusted with himself. '…the grotesqueness of it all shocked him: the meeting of reaching, suckering organs in an awful attack…the smell of sex, the squelch, the marine squirt, that uncontrollable run—it turned his civilised stomach.' His intense disgust is later displaced from him to his wife and leads to his abandonment and later killing of her. His self-loathing destroys not only his wife but his own life, too.

Violent   The incident that leads to his violent behaviour is illustrative of his complicated history, especially the tension in him between India and Britain. One day, his wife is taken to a political rally where Gandhi speaks; she doesn't want to go but is dragged there by an enthusiastic wife of a local Indian lawyer. When Jemubhai hears of this—that his wife went to cheer the words of a man who advocates disobedience to the King of England—he is furious and beats her badly. 'The anger, once released like a genie from a bottle, could never be contained. The quieter she was, the louder he shouted...His hatred was its own creature; it rose and burned out. It appeared of its own accord.' Now, having crossed this threshold, he realised 'how simple it would be for him…to commit the final violent act.'